

Generalizing to Determine the Central Idea

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How can you develop skills for generalizing and determining the central ideas of a text?

Generalizing is drawing broad conclusions based on several pieces of evidence. The skill of generalizing will help you as determine the central ideas of a text. As you read, you should look for important ideas in a text. Based upon these important ideas, you should make a generalization in order to find the central idea.

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To strengthen your skill at generalizing to determine central ideas, use the following three strategies.

Step 1: Find the central idea in a text.

Step 2: Analyze how a central idea is developed by supporting ideas.

Step 3: Provide an objective summary of the text.

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Step 1: Find the central idea in a text.

If an idea is central to a text, it is often mentioned multiple times. It might be:

- stated initially in one of the first few paragraphs
- expressed in one or more places in the body of the text
- restated in the final paragraph

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Compare the following three passages from “Like a Rolling Stone,” by Ben Fong-Torres (pages 85–87).

When I showed up one Sunday that summer, my parents were not happy to see me. They did not mince words, and as soon as my mother saw me, she cried out: “*Ai-ya! Nay kawyeong!*” This has no direct English translation, but roughly meant, “You look like that!”

“Why so long?” she asked, indicating my hair and looking ashamed for me. “It looks not good.”

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They meant well. Sure, they had their own concerns about *seet-meen*, the dreaded loss of face; they wanted us to be more Chinese, even if it meant being less American. But they were also concerned for us. They, too, knew about racism and knew that life would be easier for their sons and daughters if they weren't involved in interracial marriages.

I wished I could have engaged them in a real conversation about my feelings. I understand your concerns, I would have said. But I can't let your worries about how people in Chinatown look at you dictate how I live my life.

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Once, I used the pages of *East West* [a weekly English-language tabloid for the city's Chinese community] to tear into my fellow Chinese—specifically, Chinese a generation older than me—for their racist ways. Somewhere in America, there were Chinese kids who did kowtow to their parents in matters of professions and relationships. That kind of submission, I said, fostered perpetual racism and other biases. That was the kind of thinking, I wrote, that had to be wiped out “among people of all colors.”

Seeing my raw anger in print, I was relieved that my parents couldn't read English. . . .

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Directions: Describe the main idea of each excerpt.

- In the first, the writer's mother disapproves of his hair.
- In the second, the writer wishes he could talk to his parents about their desire for their children to date and marry only Chinese.
- In the third, the writer describes his belief that submitting to parents in matters of relationships and professions is perpetuating racism.

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Directions: What common idea can be generalized from these three examples?

- In the first, the writer's mother disapproves of his hair.
- In the second, the writer wishes he could talk to his parents about their desire for their children to date and marry only Chinese.
- In the third, the writer describes his belief that submitting to parents in matters of relationships and professions is perpetuating racism.

In all three, the writer is declaring his independence from his parents' ways of thinking. This is the central idea of the selection.

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Step 2: Analyze how a central idea is developed by supporting ideas.

If the central idea is that writer is taking a stand against his parents' views, identify how he develops and refines this idea in each of the three passages. Cite specific details in your answers.

- In the first passage, the writer's mother disapproves of his hair.

Passage 1: The description of this specific incident helps the reader understand that his mother is not accepting of modern fashion. It shows she is more concerned about appearances than the fact that her son has come to see her. This is a specific example supporting the son's judgment against his parents.

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- In the second passage, the writer wishes he could talk to his parents about their desire for their children to date and marry only Chinese.

Passage 2: The writer describes what he believes his parents' motivations are for wanting their children to date only other Chinese. He wishes that he could discuss the matter with them openly. This detail develops the central idea by showing the reader how much the son is trying to understand his parents, even if he can't agree with their principles.

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- In the third passage, the writer describes his belief that submitting to parents in matters of relationships and professions is perpetuating racism.

Passage 3: The writer describes an article he wrote condemning children who submit to their parents' racist views. Yet, he is glad that his parents couldn't read it. This shows that although he disagrees with his parents he ultimately has reservations about expressing his true feelings to them.

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Step 3: Provide an objective summary of the text.

The summary of the text should include the central idea, as well as the most relevant support for it.

Possible Summary: Ben Fong-Torres takes a stand against his parents' "racist" principles by refusing to date only Chinese women. Although he writes against their traditional beliefs, he also struggles to understand their motivations and wishes he could talk to them about their concerns.